

CHAPTER 1

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In the learning of a second language, errors are inevitable. In the 1940s to the 1960s, errors were deemed to be the products of native language habits that interfered with the learning of the second language (Lado, 1957). This formed the basis of the Contrastive Analysis (CA) Hypothesis, which was used to predict errors made by second language learners. It was believed that the more the structures of the first and second language differed, the more difficult it would be for the learners to learn the second language.

However, the 1960's saw the emergence of the Error Analysis (EA) Hypothesis, which studied the actual errors made by learners. Proponents of Error Analysis like Corder (1967) and Richards (1974) contended that errors made by second language learners were not merely due to interference from the mother tongue, but also due to generalizations made about the second language and complexities of the second language structures. Corder (1967) regards errors a necessary learning device. Errors provide feedback to the teacher on the learners' progress, and what remains for the learner to learn. To the learner, the making of errors is indispensable.

Errors are viewed as normal and natural, and are unavoidable elements in the process of learning a language. They are seen as evidence of the learning strategies adopted by learners in the process of learning. Errors provide useful data both for the teachers and

the researchers, as they are visible proof that learning has taken place. The second language learner plays an active role in the process of language learning. George (1972) considers the learner as someone who selects, organizes and stores input related to second language learning. Robinett (1978) also states that with EA, there is a shift from teaching to learning and from teacher to learner.

1.1. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

In this section, the role of English is first discussed, followed by a brief background of the subjects' school.

1.1.1 The Role of English in Malaysia

The English language was the medium of instruction in schools in Malaysia prior to independence. When Malaysia gained independence in 1957, English was adopted as an alternate official language together with Bahasa Melayu (Asmah, 1996). The process of converting the medium of instruction from English to Bahasa Melayu began in stages starting from 1968. By 1975, all subjects at primary schools, except English, were taught in the national language. The conversion process in the whole school system was completed by 1983.

In 1994, the government permitted the use of English in local institutions of higher learning especially in the teaching of science and technical subjects. But Nik Safiah (1996) felt that the importance of Bahasa Melayu would decline if English was seen as the language of progress. She also stated that Bahasa Melayu was capable of becoming

a language of science and technology, and should not just remain a language of basic communication. English, therefore, began to play a more restricted role in the field of education compared to Bahasa Melayu. However, English was retained as the second language in all schools.

At present, there has been a shift in the status of English as English has become increasingly important in local and international trade and commerce. The ability to master English is now seen as crucial in view of the globalisation and internationalisation of the world economy. Also, English provides an additional means of access to academic, professional and recreational materials. Recognizing the importance of English in the world community, the government introduced the teaching of Mathematics and Science in English in Year One, Form One and Lower Six in 2003. The STAR (Feb 5, 2003) reported that with the teaching of Mathematics and Science in English in schools from the year 2003 onwards, Malaysia would be able to participate more meaningfully in the world community in the future.

1.1.2 Background to Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Telok Gadong

This study examines errors made by learners of English from a specific school, namely Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Telok Gadong (SMKTG). SMKTG was built as a result of a proposal by Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim who was then the Education Minister.

He suggested the building of a secondary school during an official visit to Sekolah Rendah Sungai Udang in Klang, Selangor in 1990. In view of the fact that at that time the area (Sungai Udang, Jalan Yadi and Telok Gadong, Klang) did not have any secondary schools.

Thus, SMKTG was officially opened on 1st December 1991 with an initial registration of 449 pupils. Currently, it has a student population of 1190 and a total of 103 teachers. A majority of the students in this school are Malays (83%), followed by Chinese (13%) and Indians (4%). SMKTG is a semi-rural Grade A school. Currently, there are two sessions and the classes range from Remove Class to Form Five where both the science and arts streams are offered. The school is located about 5 miles from Klang town and is near a Malay settlement namely the villages of Sungai Udang, Jalan Yadi and Telok Gadong.

A majority of the students in this school are not very proficient in the English language. In 2001, the passing rate for the English Language paper in the PMR examination was 53%, with 10 pupils scoring 'A's'. In 2002, the passing rate was 58%, with 15% students scoring 'A's'. About 25% obtained a 'D', which is the minimum passing grade. Table 1.1 shows the percentage of PMR passes in English from 1998 to 2002.

Table 1.1

Percentage of PMR Passes in English from 1998 to 2002

Year	%
1998	42
1999	45
2000	49
2001	53
2002	58

From Table 1.1, it can be seen that there has been a gradual increase in the percentage of passes in the English language from 1998 to 2002. This is mainly due to the fact that the school has taken extra efforts to improve the standard of English among the students by providing them with remedial classes after school hours. These remedial classes have been targeted specifically at average and below average Form Three students to improve their performance in the PMR examination.

1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

This study focuses on the difficulties experienced by ESL Malay students when using the simple present tense, the simple past tense, the present progressive tense and the past progressive tense in their writing. This is the result of the researcher's personal observation of the level of English Language proficiency of students in her school after

having taught there for 6 years. In the course of teaching, it has been observed that her students make frequent errors in the use of tenses, which affect accuracy in their writing.

The current syllabus specifications for Form Three states that students should be able to construct grammatically correct sentences using the present, past and future tenses. Grammar is introduced within each topic and students are required to know the rules of using the present, past and future tenses. Hence, this study is undertaken to study the four selected tenses, namely, the simple present, simple past, present progressive and past progressive. It hopes to gauge the extent to which students are able to use the tenses correctly, and the types of errors made so that remedial action can be taken.

1.3 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The present study has the following objectives:

1. to identify and classify the types of errors in the simple present tense, simple past tense, present progressive tense and past progressive tense in the written compositions of ESL Form Three Malay students.
2. to count the frequency of each type of error in the simple present tense, simple past tense, present progressive tense and past progressive tense found in the written compositions of ESL Malay students.
3. to explain the possible causes of the simple present tense, simple past tense, present progressive tense and past progressive tense errors in terms of

intralingual and interlingual errors, and also by triangulating the causes of errors from the perception of the students and their English teacher.

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions will be examined in this study:

1. What are the types of errors made by ESL Form 3 Malay students in the use of the simple present, simple past, present progressive and past progressive tenses in their compositions?
2. What is the frequency of the occurrence of these errors in the simple present tense, simple past tense, present progressive tense and past progressive tense found in the compositions of the ESL Malay students?
3. What are the plausible causes of these errors in terms of interlingual and intralingual errors, and also from the perception of the students and their English teachers?

1.5 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study is limited in scope as it seeks to investigate the errors made in the simple present tense, simple past tense, present progressive tense and past progressive tense

found in 120 compositions. This study does not take into account errors found in other tenses such as the perfect and future tenses.

The sample of the study is limited too as it involves 60 Form 3 Malay students of average proficiency from a selected school, which is Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Telok Gadong, Klang. As the sample is confined only to average proficiency Malay students, it does not reflect the entire student population. The number of students and teachers interviewed is also confined to twelve and five respectively, and hence does not represent the perception of the entire student and teacher population.

1.6 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The significance of this study is that it will provide some insights as to why Malay ESL students make errors in the simple present, simple past, present progressive and past progressive tenses. This is especially significant to teachers of Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Telok Gadong as the study will provide insights into the learning difficulty faced by the students in the mastery of selected English tenses. This in turn will help the teachers to come up with strategies to improve their teaching materials and techniques.

As contended by Corder (1973), errors are important to the teacher as errors provide feedback to the effectiveness of teaching materials and teaching techniques. In this study, the errors made in the present and past tenses will indicate which areas have been

inadequately learnt, and need further attention. It will also enable the teacher to identify the problems ESL students face in the present, past, present progressive and past progressive tenses, and to deal with these areas of difficulty.

In this study the possible causes of the errors and explanation for the errors are presented. Thus, when the areas of difficulty are noted, appropriate action can be taken to overcome them. This will guide language teachers when preparing appropriate teaching materials. As for the learner, the use of the incorrect present and past tense forms reflects his learning strategies, which he uses to test the hypotheses about the structures of the second language. Hence, the findings of the study will help the language teacher respond to the needs of the learners by adopting an appropriate teaching approach for learners so that an effective learning process can take place.